

CHAPTER I

GALATIANS 1:1-5 INTRODUCTION AND ENCAPSULATION OF PAUL'S MESSAGE

A. INTRODUCTION

This bracket of verses is a lively encapsulation of the whole epistle, in a manner that is not unlike Romans 1:1-7, though in that situation Paul readily designates himself as “a bond-servant,” whereas here he is more concerned about authoritatively enforcing right gospel doctrine by means of his ordained apostolic office.

B. PAUL'S GUARANTEE OF HIS AUTHENTIC APOSTLESHIP, VS. 1-2a.

The immediate intent here is for Paul to establish rightful, divinely appointed authority so that his subsequent teaching will override the influence of deceptive Judaizers and legalists who originate from Jerusalem. Consequently, here Paul has a specific agenda concerning necessary doctrinal course correction.

1. He is a foundation stone of the church of Christ, v. 1a.

“Paul, [an] apostle, [Παῦλος ἀπόστολος, Paulos apostolos n nsm], is his divinely appointed title which is an authoritative opening, designating that Paul, meaning “little,” is a commissioned “pillar” of the church of Jesus Christ, equal with “James and Cephas (Peter) and John” (2:6-9; Eph. 2:19-20; II Cor. 12:11-12). However, by what authority was Paul given this commission, his marching orders?

2. He is an appointee of the risen Christ, vs. 1b-1c.

“Not [sent] from men nor [sent] through men but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised [ἐγείρω, par aagsm] Him from the dead.” Paul is the great doctrinal interpreter of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as the original, preeminent apostle to the Gentiles. Hence, previously feared amongst early Christendom, there has been much speculation concerning the roots of his teaching and authority, whereas here he plainly eliminates his formal academic training, his Pharisaic learning via Gamaliel, especially the church at Jerusalem (1:15-19), indeed *any* man either directly or indirectly.¹

a. Negatively, Paul has not been commissioned by man, v. 1b.

Clearly churches appoint and send men, but Paul's calling was not “from men nor through the agency of man.” The Lord Jesus' direction to Ananias makes this plain: “[H]e is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). But further, there was not even indirect

¹ Refer to J Gresham Machen's classic study, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, especially pp. 71-113.

appointment, a sort of ratification, by the other apostles in the name of the Lord, such as when they set aside Matthias as a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:21-26).

- b. Positively, Paul has been commissioned by Jesus Christ, v. 1c.

Supremely, Paul's apostolic appointment was divine, "through Jesus Christ and God the Father," specifically the risen Christ through personal encounter, by direct revelation (I Cor. 11:23; 15:8-10). He will vigorously uphold this point for most of chs. 1-2 so that his doctrine will be embraced (1:11-12, 17; 2:6-9). Likewise in I Corinthians 9:1 he claims to be an authentic apostle because he has "seen Jesus our Lord" (cf. Acts 1:21-22); hence his doctrine is to be received without question as originating from Christ (Acts 2:42; II Pet. 3:2; Jude 17).

Consequently, what Paul writes, such as in Romans and Ephesians, is the essential doctrine about Christ from Christ, the Word of God from heaven, and not his own distinctive opinion that is said to have rabbinic roots (I Cor. 14:37; II Pet. 3:15-16). Thus for Paul, "the gospel of Christ" is not only the gospel about Christ, but also the gospel received from Christ. Paul would vehemently repudiate the scholarly assessment that the doctrine contained in his epistles was distinctively "Pauline." Undoubtedly he would affirm that all of his teaching was Christ-generated.

3. He is accompanied with "the brethren" at Corinth, v. 2a.

"And all the brethren [ἀδελφός, adelphos n npm] who are with me." They, a seeming broad assembly, along with his close associates, have the same loving interest and conviction as Paul, but not the same authority. However, unlike the usual immediate inclusion of "Silvanus/Timothy" (Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; I & II Thess. 1:1), the urgency of a doctrinal rift concerning the gospel means that they must take second place here.

C. PAUL'S GREETING TO THE GALATIAN CHURCHES, VS. 2B-3.

1. His address to "the churches of Galatia" v. 2b.

"To the churches [ἐκκλησία, ekklēsia n dpf] of Galatia." We have already considered the geographical location of this territory, it more likely being toward the northern region, that would yet require an approach through the south. But what of the living conditions within this society, especially for Christians? When Peter writes to this same location at least ten years later, he is very sensitive of the intense suffering and persecution that the saints are experiencing for he addresses them as "choice aliens" who are being "tested by fire," who suffer a "fiery ordeal" and are "reviled" (I Pet. 1:1, 7; 4:12-14). So now as well, there is ongoing persecution under Nero along with opposition from pagan mystery religions also found throughout Asia Minor.

2. His benediction of "grace" and "peace," v. 3.

"Grace [χάρις, charis n nsf] to you and peace [εἰρήνη, eirēnē n nsf] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This salutation is common to all of Paul's epistles. His design is for the blessing of God to be upon His church (I Tim. 3:15), but particularly that "grace

and peace” which is poured out upon those who have been saved by “grace” and received “peace” from God.

- a. “Grace,” here is derived from a common Greek salutation, into which Paul pours much Christ-centered meaning. It is the lavish ongoing favor of the triune God, certainly unmerited, yet that which is the child of God’s inheritance through sonship (Eph. 2:7; 3:16; Phil. 4:19). Hence he concludes with a similar prayer (6:18), so that saints down the ages have continued to sing of this many-faceted, saving and keeping grace, and in so doing draw upon its storehouse.

Grace ’tis a charming sound, harmonious
To the ear:
Heav’n with the echo shall resound, and
All the earth shall hear.

- *Philip Doddridge*

Great God of wonders, all Thy ways are
Matchless, God-like, and divine;
But the fair glories of Thy grace, more
God-like and unrivalled shine.

- *Samuel Davies*

Through many dangers, toils and snares I
have already come:
'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

- *John Newton*

- b. “Peace,” is derived from the familiar Hebrew greeting, “shalom.” It is that happy state of well being and spiritual prosperity which results from being kept by divine grace; thus it is a derived relationship; it is the fruit of a life that is hid in the grace of God (5:22). But it is only that peace which is sourced in “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” Who is “the God of peace” (Rom. 15:33). So Paul concludes as well as commences this epistle with his pastoral prayer for the peace of God to be upon the brethren (6:16, 18).

D. PAUL'S GOSPEL OF GLORIOUS SOVEREIGN GRACE, VS. 4-5.

It is not difficult to see the direction of Paul’s thinking here, for the mere mention of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of v. 3 stimulates him to expound upon the saving work of that glorious person, who is the very fount of “grace and peace.” The significance, and not simply the fact, of the atonement becomes immediately apparent here. For Christians are not only to accept the fact that Christ died and rose again from the dead, but rather they are to understand *why* he died and rose again in personal terms. We must understand both what God accomplishes and what He also purposes. We are not merely to distinguish between theories of the atonement, but rather discover the essential purpose of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection (I Cor. 15:3). There is a three-fold purpose of the atonement described here which is, “according to the [sovereign] will of our God and Father.”

1. God's *saving* purpose through the death of His well beloved Son, v. 4a.

“Who gave Himself for [ὑπέρ, *huper pre*] our sins.” By “giving Himself,” Jesus freely, voluntarily, without any negotiation involving humanity, offered Himself, at the Father’s behest, so as to save sinners from sin, hence the multiplicity of their sins, even prominent “Jerusalem Sinners,” that is “the Vilest of Men,” as John Bunyan describes them² (Eph. 5:2; I Tim. 2:6; Tit. 2:14). This statement is the gospel in a nutshell that, like I Corinthians 15:1-3, where the grace of God is most clearly described without the actual use of this precious word. For at its heart, saving grace is but substitution, “the just for [ὑπέρ, *huper*] the unjust, so that He [Christ] might bring us to God” (I Pet. 3:18; cf. Mark 10:45). It is for this reason that the natural, self-sufficient, works-oriented man of this world does not like salvation through substitution; he is offended by it; in effect he blindly says to God, “Leave me alone, don’t presume about my supposed impotent condition and interfere; I am not totally helpless; because of God-given autonomy I can contribute toward my salvation!” But Jesus Christ is not put off!

- a. For the Son of God purposed *sovereign grace* for our “sins” because of their dominion in holding us captive. Further, this grace of God was *sovereignly* bestowed in that Christ “gave Himself” for our sins.” This was a unilateral work of redemption, not a negotiated bilateral settlement (Rom. 5:8); Jesus came claiming conscripts, not merely having a hope for volunteers.
- b. So Jesus purposed to impart *greater grace* for our “great sins.” The grace of God is *greater* because it overcomes the greatness of our sin that manifests sins, whatever the quantity and intensity may be. This grace was given in the very face and defiant nature of sin (Rom. 5:8), its “utter sinfulness” (Rom. 7:13). This grace “reigns” and thus conquers with greater force and effect than sin (Rom. 5:20-21).
- c. Then He also purposed *costly grace* “for our sins.” The grace of God is *costly* because of the necessity of the Son of God’s offering of himself (Luke 24:26). While free grace comes to the believing sinner, the cost to God is the death of His only Son. So, “No man can by any means redeem his brother or give to God a ransom for him—for the redemption of his soul is costly” (Ps. 49:7-8).
- d. He purposed *satisfactory grace* “for our sins.” Though God was rightly offended by our sin and consequent sins, yet His justice was satisfied in Christ’s offering of His holy Being and bearing of that foul load, “in His body on the cross” (I Pet. 2:24). Because of this satisfaction, this righteous, reconciling “will of our God,” His wrath was turned to peace (Isa. 53:11; Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1).
- e. By way of illustration, Martin Luther offers 3400 words of enthralled comment on these six words, “who gave Himself for our sins.”

[Paul] hath nothing in his mouth but Christ; and therefore in every word there is a fervency of spirit and life. . . . With such gunshot and such artillery must the Papacy be destroyed, and all the religions of the heathen, all works, all merits and superstitious ceremonies. . . . This then is the chief knowledge and true wisdom of Christians. . . . [L]earn here of Paul to believe that Christ was given, not for feigned [pretended] or

² John Bunyan, *Works*, pp. 67-103.

counterfeit sins, nor yet for small sins, but for great and huge sins; not for one or two, but for all; not for vanquished sins (for no man, no nor angel, is able to overcome the least sin that is), but for invincible sins. . . . If he gave himself to death for our sins, then undoubtedly he is no tyrant or judge which will condemn us for our sins. He is no caster-down of the afflicted, but a raiser-up of those that are fallen, a merciful reliever and comforter of the heavy and broken-hearted. Else Paul should lie in saying: 'which gave himself for our sins.'³

- f. By way of application, here the collective pronoun "our" nevertheless means that individually, Christ "gave Himself for *my* sin," or as 2:20 declares, He "loved *me* and gave Himself up for *me*." As Horatio Spafford has written:

My sin— oh, the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to His cross and *I* bear it no more!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O *my* soul!

2. God's *sanctifying* purpose through the death of His well beloved Son, v. 4b.

"So that He [Christ] might rescue/deliver/remove [ἐξαιρέω, exaireō v amss] us from this present evil/pernicious [πονηρός, ponēros adj gsm] age [αἰών, aiōn n gsm] according to the will of our God and Father." This is the essential saving work of the gospel of Christ for the believer. Luther succinctly gets to the heart of Galatians when he writes here: "In these words also Paul effectually handleth the argument of this Epistle."⁴ In other words, following the work of justification, that complete, just and gracious dealing with "our sin," there is a consequent effectual rescue, a deliverance, a being set apart, a sanctification from "this present evil age." This is a work and fruit of the gospel, not the assistance of Moses!

- a. The Christ who "gave himself for our sins" is the same Christ who, on the ground of this justification, has rescued us from this present evil age; it is the same grace that justifies which also sanctifies as a consequence. We are not only clothed in righteousness (justification) (Rom. 9:30; Phil. 3:9) whereby our *sin* is pardoned, but also rescued from unrighteousness (sanctification) that the *world* represents, solely on the basis of the Son of God's atonement, and the power of the gospel. Having been initially saved by the gospel, we are consummately saved by the gospel (Phil 1:6).
- b. Here Paul emphasizes this sanctifying effect of the gospel. We are "plucked out" or "rescued" (aorist of ἐξαιρέω, exaireō), from this present, transitory evil age. This word is used to describe the rescue by Claudius Lysias of Paul from assault by Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 23:27). This sanctification concerns, not ongoing growth in grace as the present tense would represent, but that definitive sanctification whereby the gospel sets apart the believing sinner from the world he formerly embraced (I Cor. 6:11; I Pet. 2:9). This same truth is precisely taught in 6:14, where the gospel causes the believer to be crucified to the world, while the world responds with the crucifixion

³ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, pp. 46-53. J. B. Lightfoot similarly comments: "'deliver' strikes the keynote of the epistle. The Gospel is a rescue, an emancipation from a state of bondage." *Commentary on Galatians*, p. 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

of the believer. John Murray comments: “This [definitive sanctification] means that there is a decisive and definitive breach with the power and service of sin in the case of every one who has come under the control of the provisions of grace.”⁵ This is also a radical, rapturous deliverance which parallels the experience of Noah and his family and Lot and his family (Gen. 6-9; 18-19; II Pet. 2:4-10).

- c. But further note that such sanctification is, “according to the will of our God and Father.” Hence this sanctification as deliverance certainly falls within God’s sovereign decree, and thus it suggests certainty that is reassuring. As Count von Zinzendorf has written:

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

But more is intended here. The meaning is that the way of rescue from this present evil age is according to God’s design, not man’s or our own. Man has a thousand plans for the saving of this planet, all futile, whereas God has but one plan, the gospel plan in all of its fullness, the Father’s plan, by which this present world is to be overcome (John 16:33).

- d. By way of illustration Luther declares:

Let these words then of Paul remain as they are indeed, true and effectual, not colored or counterfeit, namely, that this present world is evil. Let it nothing at all move thee, that in a great number of men there be many excellent virtues, and that there is so great a show of holiness in hypocrites. But mark thou rather what Paul saith, out of whose words thou mayest boldly and freely pronounce this sentence against the world, that the world with all his wisdom, power and righteousness, is the kingdom of the devil; out of the which God alone is able to deliver us by his only begotten Son.⁶

- e. By way of application the New Testament picture of this age is that of a ship run aground on rocks, breaking up. Some are rescued since they confess their plight and cry out to be delivered, but others are foolishly trying to patch the vessel up and cast off once again, only to encounter further tragedy after tragedy! We might name this ship, “this present evil age.”

(1) Paul elsewhere describes this ruinous condition.

- (a) Romans 1:18-32; 12:2; 13:12-14. This world is a sham, a pretense, which at its core is anti-God. The United Nations is prominent proof.
- (b) I Corinthians 1:20, 27-28; 2:6. The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God; the wisdom of this age and its rulers is coming to nothing.
- (c) II Corinthians 4:4. This world, being blinded by Satan, does not comprehend the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

⁵ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2, p. 280.

⁶ Luther, *Glatians*, p. 55.

- (d) Ephesians 2:2-3. The children of this world follow a course, a broad path of lusting with their minds and flesh, having Satan as their leader.
 - (e) Colossians 2:20-21. A Christian is dead with Christ to the basic principles of this world, its boasting in self and works.
- (2) John tells us that, “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (I John 5:19).
- (3) The Old Testament and New Testament picture believers as, “strangers and exiles on the earth. . . they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:13-16; I Pet. 2:11). That is what Abraham was looking for, as do all of his seed (Heb. 11:8-10).
- f. By way of application, how do you value this present age we live in, this turbulent 21st century?
- (1) Do you look appreciatively at man’s performance? His progress in technology, arts, education? His valiant struggle for world peace, social justice? His courage and optimism in the face of grave problems? Consequently you find this present time exciting, stimulating, satisfying? This is sure evidence you are not a Christian. This focus has no time for the one true God, His righteousness, His kingdom, His rescuing Son, this gospel of Paul. Nevertheless, like the age of Noah and Lot, this voyage of mankind is doomed!
 - (2) However, are you disturbed by man’s wretchedness, his accelerating depravity, his endless pursuit of novel ways of sinning, his spiritual void, even as Paul observed at Athens (Acts 17:16)? Do you appreciate that man *cannot* save the ship? You discern the superficiality of man at his best, his motivation by lust for power, esteem, riches, his self-idolatry, his bloated pride, his sophisticated hypocrisy. Then the gospel that Paul proclaims is good news, for it tells that rescue is possible.
3. God’s *glorifying* purpose through the death of His well beloved Son, v. 5.
- “To whom [the Father] be the glory [δόξα, doxa n nsf] for/throughout the ages of the ages/forever and ever! Amen [ἀμήν, amēn ptc].” When the Apostle Paul contemplates the gospel, it stimulates him to praise and adore God rather than mainly regard this truth in terms of personal benefits, in a utilitarian sense as is common today (Rom. 16:25-27; I Tim. 1:15-17). So here, this gospel is so wonderful that it causes this redeemed soul to earnestly worship God, to desire that His reputation be exalted, to attribute to Him the highest praise.
- a. The word “glory” is δόξα, doxa, from which “doxology” is derived, which, in connection with its Hebrew counterpart, means “weight of reputation/importance/splendor,” just as a king has glory when fully robed. Certain earthly objects have degrees of glory or radiance (I Cor. 15:41), but God has transcendent glory that man cannot fully behold and live (Ex. 33:20). Certainly God’s works declare His glory (Ps. 19:1), but supremely the work of the gospel is the most glorious work of all!

- b. For Paul, the glory of God was his constant delight. Why was this so?
- (1) Because Paul had met with God in a way that so contrasted with his former days of entanglement with formal religion and Pharisaism and personal performance (v. 14).
 - (2) Because Paul had come to grips with his own corruption, the thorough pollution of it, his bondage to sin, which God alone was able to deliver him from (Rom. 7:9; I Tim. 1:13, 15).
 - (3) Because Paul had come to understand that his only hope was God's sovereign grace, his "calling by grace," v. 15, and thus this gracious God was infinitely wonderful (Eph. 1:5-7, 12-14; 3:20-21).
 - (4) Because Paul had come to understand that not only was he saved by grace, but also in an ongoing sense it is, "this grace in which we [presently, on account of the past] stand" (Rom. 5:2).
 - (5) Because Paul had come to understand how incomparably good, and wise, and enthralling and glorious are the purposes of this gracious God (Rom. 11:33-36; 16:25-27).
- c. By way of application, perhaps we can test ourselves at this point concerning whether we really appreciate something of the glory of God. Ask yourself:
- (1) Is the "glory of God" simply a term I have learned about, that can roll off my lips in a cool confessional manner without any accompanying sense of God's incomparable greatness, His radiant holiness, His brilliant majesty, His righteous splendor, His redeeming greatness?
 - (2) Do I understand something of what it means to comprehend, "the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."? If I am a Christian this should be the case since Paul tells us that the God who said, "'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has *shone in our hearts* to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." And he goes on further to reveal, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (II Cor. 4:6-7).
 - (3) Here is the reason why Paul concludes his introduction concerning God, "to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen." As Horatius Bonar has written:

I bless the Christ of God
 I rest on love divine;
 And with unfaltering lip and heart,
 I call the Savior mine.

I praise the God of grace;
 I trust His truth and might;
 He calls me His, I call Him mine,
 My God, my joy, my light.